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FilmColumbia documentaries focus on photographer, diabetes

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'Beyond Epic' filmmaker Hannah Swaka

Filmmaker Hannah Swaka speaks after the FilmColumbia screening of her film 'Beyond Iconic' Friday afternoon at the Morris Memorial. Katie Kocijanski/Chatham Courier

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By Katie Kocijanski | 0 comments

Posted on October 30, 2013 CHATHAM — On Friday afternoon, FilmColumbia screened back to back documentaries at the Morris Memorial: "Beyond Iconic: Photographer Dennis Stock" and "Sugar Babies." Each was followed by a question and answer session with the directors: Hannah Sawka of "Beyond Iconic" and Jenny Mackenzie of "Sugar Babies."

'Beyond Epic'

"I don't really speak much before the film. I'll let it speak for itself," said Sawka prior to the screening.

Her film gave viewers a glimpse into the life of a legendary photographer Dennis Stock. "Beyond Iconic" alternated between showing Stock teaching a class at the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck in October 2008 and images of his famous photography.

Stock is featured throughout the film describing different periods in his life. Parts of the film also show him at his home in Woodstock, Ulster County with his wife and their four dogs.

A series of photos filled the screen as it began. As each image was shown, a click of a camera could be heard in the background. Pictures of movie stars, such as Lauren Bacall, Audrey Hepburn and Sidney Poitier, were among the many famous faces shown, as well as snapshots of notable jazz singers, including Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong.

"I just go out there and follow my nose," said Stock of how he picks his photos.

Born in 1928, he quit school at the age of 16 and joined the Navy. It was there that he discovered a talent for photography when he was asked to take pictures at a party. Stock went on to explain how he was drawn to photography as a "way to make a living."

He became friends with actor James Dean in the 1950s. He recalled meeting Dean at a party and talking with him for hours.

In 1955, Dean invited Stock to a sneak preview of his newest movie, "East of Eden." Stock said he came out of the movie theater and saw Dean sitting on his motorcycle, watching people come out of the theater.

Stock remarked how Dean and actors such as Marlon Brando changed the caliber of how actors were in Hollywood during that time. Some of Dean's most iconic images were photographed by Stock.

Sawka acknowledged the local jazz community at the close of the film. Her father had been a personal friend of Stock. As a child, she recalled the conversations her father had with Stock about his life.

When talking about the Japanese film industry in the film, Stock utters a single quote: "Photography is a way to record our existence." Sawka said she believes this is the "heart of the film." Stock died in 2010.

For more on "Beyond Iconic," visit the film's website, www.jansawka.com/hmsawka/beyondiconic.

'Sugar Babies'

Festival Assistant Director Grace Fay introduced "Sugar Babies," which features four children living with Type 1 and Type 2 diabetes. Fay shared her personal connection to the film; her brother was diagnosed with the diabetes 20 years ago.

"I've been coming to Chatham for the past 32 years. This is my second film to be screened," said Mackenzie, as she introduced her film to the audience. Calling it a deeply personal story, her own daughter, Lizzie, one of the children featured in the film, was diagnosed with Type 1 when she was 4 years old. Mackenzie noted that as she began her research process, she expanded the film to include both types.

Along with Lizzie's story, the film takes a look at the lives of other diabetes victims — how the disease has affected their families and changed their daily routines. For the filmmaker's daughter, she was a third generation diagnosis; Mackenzie's aunt and brother had both been previously diagnosed.

The filmmaker recalled not wanting Lizzie to lose her sense of adventure and encouraged her to do anything she put her mind to. As she learned more about Type 2, Mackenzie began to understand its misconceptions. The film states that people who are diagnosed with Type 2 are commonly associated with being overweight, not eating right or not exercising, but it's much more than that, she noted. Type 2 is curable; Type 1 is not.

As of 2012, 20 percent of residents of inner cities have Type 2 — one of the many astounding facts mentioned in the documentary. The film pointed out how hard it is for children today to "say no to the constant onslaught of sugar."

"We are fighting the dominant junk food culture and couch potato lifestyles," stated the film.

Mackenzie is hoping "Sugar Babies" will push diabetes education into another realm. She is scheduled to speak about her film at a future American Association of Diabetes Educators conference.

For more on "Sugar Babies," visit www.jennymackenziefilms.com.